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ABSTRACT

During the early seventies, the number and ethnic origin of immigrants to British Columbia has changed to such an extent that the B.C. school system has felt the effect. Teachers in the elementary grades increasingly were faced with students who lacked fluency in the language of instruction. When it was discovered that a third of the students under the supervision of the Vancouver School Board spoke English as a second language (ESL), funds were made available to double the existing ESL program. This included increasing programs for training teachers of ESL. The quality and quantity of summer programs for ESL children were increased, as were programs to assist parents and children in adjusting to a new culture. In addition, teachers are seeking information on the cultural backgrounds of immigrant children. It is suggested that the Department of Education could assist school districts by providing expertise in the area of program and curriculum development, and by coordinating ESL and orientation programs for immigrants and their families. (AM)

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IMMIGRANT CHILDREN AND B.C. SCHOOLS

Mary Ashworth

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The beauty and wealth of British Columbia have attracted immigrants since the early explorers came through the Rockies or round the Horn and sent word back of this land of promise.

The number of immigrants arriving in British Columbia has increased steadily over the years, but particularly during the last decade which saw 12,324 come in 1964 against 34,481 in 1974, the last year for which figures are available. The average over the eleven year period was 22,761. During these years, owing to an amendment in 1967 to the regulations governing immigration, a major change took place in the source countries. Whereas in 1964 approximately 55 percent of immigrants to British Columbia came from English-speaking countries such as the United Kingdom, the U.S.A., and Australia, that figure had dropped to approximately 40 percent by 1974. This new wave of non-English speaking immigrants did not, however, come from the traditional source countries of Europe, but from the over-populated lands of Asia. In 1964, 1,436 immigrants came to British Columbia from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China; by 1974 the figure had risen to 4,558. In 1964, 359 people came from India and Pakistan; by 1974 the figure was 4,144.¹

Both the increase in the number of immigrants arriving in British Columbia and the change in the source countries has had an effect upon B.C. schools particularly during the 1970's. Because few immigrant children master English in one year with sufficient competence to be able to study without additional teacher help, the difficulties facing children and teachers compounded and spread as the numbers of those needing special help built up. Children who arrived one year were not ready the following year to compete on equal footing with their Canadian-born peers in spite of a Department of Education directive that suggested they should be ready - a totally unrealistic

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objective except for a very few children. But those who were in a New Canadian class had to move out to make room for the newcomers whether they were ready or not, and classroom teachers faced more and more children who lacked fluency in the language of instruction.

Many children had to make some major cultural adjustments often resulting in their living in two worlds, the world of their parents and the world of the school. Teaching methods and educational expectations were different. And British Columbians were not at all sure how to react to this influx of highly visible immigrants. Good programs were needed to help the children master English and become comfortable in the new culture.

The development of good E.S.L. (English as a Second Language) programs for children in British Columbia has been partially held back by a lack of information regarding the number of children who need English language instruction and the level each has attained in his English language development. Politicians are not impressed by vagueness but by statistics and pressure; and politicians still control our schools and what goes on in them by the simple expediency of holding the purse strings. It is surely significant therefore that when the Vancouver School Board finally produced figures showing that a third of its students spoke English as a second language - and the strength of the immigrant vote became obvious - that a grant enabling it to double its E.S.L. program was immediately forthcoming.

England has for a number of years counted its immigrant children each year. In March, 1976, the B.C. Department of Education made a beginning by seeking information from school boards on the number of children each district felt needed help either intensively in a segregated E.S.L. class, or through periodic visits to a Language Centre, or through a "Buddy" system, or through some other program.

Two comparisons may help to show the rapid growth in the number of New Canadian or E.S.L. classes (the terms are synonymous) during the 1970's. According to figures given to me by the Department

of Education, in 1972 52 approvals for New Canadian classes were given: this figure rose to 189 by 1975. In 1971 17 school districts received grants for these classes; by 1975 43 districts had sought and received funding.

If every one of those 189 classes in 1975 had contained the maximum of 20 students - and they did not - 3,780 students would have been receiving help in mastering English. But in 1974 alone, approximately 6,500 children aged 0 - 19 years arrived in British Columbia from either non-English speaking countries or from the West Indies. (The West Indies is included because some of these children are being placed in New Canadian classes in Eastern Canada, though it is extremely doubtful that this is the best placement for them. As yet, the proportion of West Indian children in British Columbia schools is relatively low.) When we take into account the number of children who arrived both during 1975 and those who arrived previous to 1975 and who still needed help, it is obvious that 189 classes was insufficient.

But, without doubt, progress has been made in the education of immigrant children in British Columbia and certain accomplishments should be acknowledged before the future is examined.

During the 1960's Mel Henderson, a Vancouver Secondary School teacher, successfully persuaded the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia to mount a course to train teachers in the skills of teaching English as a second language. Previously, anyone interested in training as an E.S.L. teacher had to go to Ontario for the government-sponsored summer course. During the summers of 1966 and 1967 Dr. A.V.P. Elliott came from England and gave a combined Linguistics-E.S.L. Methodology course to 20 students. By contrast, during the year 1975/1976, the English Education Department ran a total of seven sections of Education 478, An Introduction to Teaching English as a Second Language, covering the winter session, inter-session and summer session, turning out approximately 150 trained teachers who had taken two courses, one in Linguistics and one in Methodology. During the previous year, 1974/75, over 180 teachers completed

their training. In addition, during 1975/76, 20 students were enrolled in Masters' programs in E.S.L. Simon Fraser University also provides training in E.S.L. but not on the same scale as UBC as yet.

The number of trained E.S.L. teachers employed in schools in the lower mainland has increased dramatically, particularly in the last two years. For example, in 1970 the Vancouver School Board employed approximately 30 E.S.L. teachers of whom only about twenty percent had any formal E.S.L. training. It now employs between 70 and 80 E.S.L. teachers of whom three quarters or more are trained. While formal training does not guarantee excellence in teaching, the strong probability is that a trained teacher will do a better job than an untrained teacher; and after sitting in on over forty E.S.L. classes for children across Canada, I have yet to see an untrained teacher doing a first class job.

The days when the New Canadian classes were described to me as "the garbage heap for teachers" are over and the assignment to classes for immigrant children of teachers who were considered too sick or too old or too incompetent to teach Canadian children is a thing of the past.

One district which has always been highly supportive of the concept of hiring trained E.S.L. teachers is Burnaby. Right from the beginning it chose its teachers carefully building up a core of excellent teachers, some of whom are known in many parts of B.C. for the workshops they provide. Burnaby also gave its teachers a half-day a month released time to enable them to get together to discuss common problems and to seek solutions. Other neighboring school districts took advantage of these meetings to send their teachers to take part in these discussions, and this pooling of ideas by teachers who so frequently are the only one of their kind in a school was highly beneficial.

The most dramatic changes have taken place in School District No. 39 - Vancouver, which receives by far the largest number of

immigrant children of all the districts. As a result of criticism regarding the apparent poor showing of Vancouver students in a province-wide composition examination, the school board set up a Task Force on English. Its report, made public in June, 1975, pointed out that a total of 2,845 students required placement in E.S.L. classes and another 738 required special help in addition to E.S.L., making a combined total of 3,583 who needed the help of a trained E.S.L. teacher.² At that time Vancouver had approximately 35 E.S.L. classes which probably served between fifteen and twenty percent of those who needed English language instruction.

A brief to Victoria brought a quick infusion of money enabling the school board to double the number of classes for non-English speaking students and to initiate a variety of programs, so that in addition to the segregated E.S.L. classes, Vancouver has English Learning Centres, each staffed by a teacher and a teacher-aide, to which students go on a withdrawal basis. Other students visit Learning Assistants or Special Needs teachers. Finally, the school board appointed a full-time E.S.L. consultant. Certain weaknesses still remain: the new E.S.L. classes have a limit of twelve students, so doubling the number of classes has not doubled the number of students in E.S.L. classes, and there must still be students who need help and are not getting it. There has been a distinct improvement in services to secondary school students, but the primary children are not yet as well taken care of as they should be. It is, unfortunately, not true that all young children learn English automatically by osmosis - some do, but those who do not finish up as "reading problems" by Grade IV.

It has not been easy for some of the outlying districts to cope with what has been a fairly rapid increase in the number of non-English speaking children in their schools. One lower-mainland district went from one New Canadian child to twenty seven in one year - a rate of increase it hopes will not continue. The desire to improve the quality of E.S.L. teaching has been demonstrated by the number of requests for workshops from many

school districts.

Thanks to the efforts of the Immigrant Services Society of B.C., the last three years has seen a rapid expansion in the number of classes for Moms and Tots all over the province. The value of the classes is immeasurable. The mother who speaks English will not be left outside the mainstream of Canadian life, but, even more important, she will be able to be a part of her child's life and understand the tensions and conflicts he faces as a member of two cultures. The little tots who learn English before they start school will not be six years behind their peers in Grade I in English language development.

The last few years have seen an increase in both the quality and quantity of summer programs for New Canadian children, as well as the establishment by agencies such as SUCCESS in Chinatown of programs to help both immigrant parents and their children during the early transition period.

More and more classroom teachers have been seeking help on understanding the cultural backgrounds of the children in our multicultural schools. S.F.U. and U.B.C. and Capilano College have started courses to give teachers a knowledge of different cultures and of the nature of prejudice. The Canadian Council of Christians and Jews and the Immigrant Services Society of B.C. are during 1976/1977 jointly sponsoring a Multicultural Team which will assist teachers and other school workers to reach a better understanding of our multicultural society. The B.C.T.F.'s Task Force on Racism has already produced a visual presentation dealing with the history, subtleties and complexities of racism in B.C.

But the world of E.S.L. is far from perfect. Progress made so far has been due to the courage, foresight and concern of a few people, none of whom, until recently, held positions of prestige. Further progress may well depend on (1) some leadership and guidance from the Department of Education, and (2) an assured budget which

will go some way to meeting the needs, coupled with (3) the continued efforts of teachers and district supervisory personnel.

The Department of Education could assist school districts in two ways: the first lies in helping school districts to develop programs and curricula by providing some expertise. When a school begins to feel the pressure of increasing numbers of non-English speaking children, with the exception of Vancouver and Burnaby, there is rarely anyone in their district board office to whom they can turn for expert advice. There is no course of study and no guidelines available in B.C. and, as far as I can gather, no one in the Division of Integrated and Supportive Services in the Department of Education who is trained in E.S.L.

The second role that the Department of Education could play is that of co-ordinator of E.S.L. and orientation programs for immigrants and their families. There is, for example, a grave lack of articulation between the E.S.L. courses in secondary schools and those provided - or not provided - by junior colleges and universities, which has resulted in far too many students sitting in first year college or university English courses quite unable to cope. Secondly, many immigrant parents do not understand how the B.C. school system works and feel uncomfortable about visiting the school because of their inability to communicate in English. Early orientation programs run through the school in the immigrants' own languages could help to clear up problems relating to course selection, discipline, teaching methods and value conflicts. Our present piecemeal approach to the problems of immigrant parents is hopelessly inefficient.

While budget cuts have been common recently across Canada in many federal and provincial government departments, it has in the past been customary for E.S.L. classes to be amongst the first to be cut and the last to be restored. Hence, teachers of E.S.L. classes may be hired as temporary staff or long-term substitutes rather than as permanent employees, an employment situation which is highly un-

satisfactory. Besides reducing the number of students who can be helped, budget cuts also prevent research, experimentation and curriculum building from occurring.

One of the current issues facing us is whether or not to help immigrant children maintain their first language. Once again we find decisions on the bilingual or multilingual nature of Canada being taken more on the grounds of political expediency than on what is best for Canada's children in this rapidly changing world.

Pressure is mounting in the U.S.A. for bilingual-bicultural education to become a viable alternative to unilingual-unicultural education; and while the nature and size of Canada does not permit us to take over America's solutions as our own, neither do they preclude us from finding our own solutions to our linguistic and cultural problems.

There is no room ever for complacency in education, least of all in E.S.L. which, as it attempts to deal with very human problems aroused by different languages and different cultures, must ultimately reconcile these differences within a global concept of the brotherhood of man if this age of violence is to end.

But let us be quite clear about one thing: immigration to Canada will continue. The report to Parliament of the Special Joint Committee on Immigration Policy recommended a minimum of 100,000 a year.³ All the arguments we can raise against continued immigration - unemployment, racial problems, housing, etc. - will have little effect on the third world countries who look at our so-called "poor" and see them living like kings. If we do not share our material wealth voluntarily and seek to establish a greater global justice, the "final solution" may be imposed upon us, for as Barbara Ward so rightly says: "The world's poor increasingly know that their condition is not an act of God but the choice of man."⁴

Footnotes:

1. Canada Department of Manpower and Immigration. Immigration Statistics, 1964 - 1974. Ottawa: Queen's Printer, Tables 3 and 4.
2. Task Force on English. Report of the Task Force on English. Vancouver: Education Services Group, Vancouver School Board, June, 1975, pp. 18 - 20.
3. M. Riel and M. O'Connell. "Immigration", Report to Parliament of the Special Joint Committee on Immigration Policy. Ottawa: Queen's Printer, November 6, 1975, p. 53:12. para.#14.
4. Barbara Ward. The Home of Man. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1976, p. 263.